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(In)Visible Women in Political Life in Slovakia*

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Abstract: The article deals with the questions of the (in)visibility of women in Slovak political life. The material presents statistical data on women's participation in Slovak national, regional and local politics with the support of qualitative data from interviews with women politicians and activists. The author looks at the reasons for the low political representation of women and the unsuccessful attempts to increase it by introducing positive mechanisms such as quotas. The primary focus is put on the representation of women in municipal politics. The author analyses the main reasons why women are more successful in local politics than in 'high' politics.

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Introduction

Every country has its own system of values, attitudes, norms and rules that predetermine the role of women in society. Women in Slovakia represent 51.4% of the whole population (Census 2001), but they remain significantly under-represented in decision-making at all levels. Although women in Czechoslovakia won the right to vote in 1919, this did not automatically lead to their integration into political life. The stereotype that women do not understand politics and should not 'poke their noses into it' has prevailed throughout the whole 20th century – no matter what political system was in power.

During the state socialist era, equality between men and women was formally declared in the Constitution,¹ which stated that all citizens had equal rights and

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¹ The fundamental guarantee of equal rights is declared in the Constitution of the Slovak Republic. It covers the general right to vote and to be elected, but it does not mention the principle of gender equality in participation in decision-making. The main programme document of the Slovak Cabinet is the National Action Plan for Women in the Slovak Republic, adopt-

equal duties; men and women had an equal position in the family, the workplace and in public activities; and the working-class society guaranteed the equality of its citizens by creating equal opportunities in all spheres of life in society. In reality, the discrimination of women was concealed behind this proclaimed equality organised from the top-down. Women became a source of cheap labour, essential to the process of industrialisation and the implementation of five-year economic plans. Gender segregation in the labour market, discrimination in the work force, and the glass ceiling confronting women in all state enterprises became an everyday reality accepted by both women and men. Women's participation in public political life was secured by quotas, which, however, did not mean any political power for women. The proposed proportion of women to be included on candidate lists for election to the legislative bodies in Czechoslovakia was up to 30%. All female and male candidates were designated by the Communist Party, and the elections only confirmed their candidature. In spite of a relatively high number of women in the legislative authorities, their participation in politics was only a formality, and their impact on decision-making was negligible. All decisions were made by the male-dominated leadership of the Communist Party rather than by Parliament or the government, which merely accepted all the Party's proposals one-hundred-percent of the time. Results of the parliamentary elections were always celebrated as a victory of 'socialist democracy'. After 1989, the quota system was immediately abolished as a discredited symbol of socialism, and this has been reflected in a dramatic decline in women's political representation. People's memories of obligatory and formal quotas have had a negative impact on post-1989 debates on women's political representation.

After 1989, Slovak women faced a new challenge of a choice, which they never had during socialism: a choice of staying at work and being economically and professionally active or of returning to the 'traditional role of women', in the family and with children. The tendency in favour of the return of women to the private sphere re-emerged among conservative political parties and the church. Even some official figures (e.g. Emília Kováčová, the wife of the former Slovak president) challenged women to devote their life to their 'primary role – childrearing', as the only guarantee for the future of the country. This approach did not find many followers for two main reasons:

ed in 1997 (Government Resolution No. 650/1997), which followed the recommendations of the 4th United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The gender mainstreaming approach, encouraging a gender sensitive approach in all areas of government policies and measures at all levels and at all stages, is reflected in the cabinet document, *The Concept of Equal Opportunities for Women and Men* (Government Resolution No. 232/2001), which was adopted by parliament in 2001. The National Plan for Employment in the Slovak Republic (Government Resolution No. 908/2000) pays special attention to equal opportunities related to employment. The Labour Act (311/2001 Coll.) covers the issues of the rights of women in the field of social policy and employment. The Anti-Discrimination Act (365/2004 Coll.) is the latest and most significant piece of legislation aimed at guaranteeing the equal treatment of citizens in all areas.

1. The difficult period of the transition to a market economy based on neo-liberal principles neglecting gender perspectives led to the deterioration of socio-economic conditions for many citizens, and most families could not rely on a single income.
2. The majority of Slovak women had achieved the same or higher level of education as men during socialism and wanted to work and build their professional careers.

The high percentage of women in the labour force in Slovakia (up to 45% of the total labour force in the 1990s; Bútorová et al. [1999: 290]) has not led to higher women's participation in political life. Women are active and visible in most areas of Slovak society, but they remain under-represented in politics. The number of women politically active has been only slowly increasing in recent years in almost all spheres of political and civic life. However, those women who enter politics and reach higher posts do not automatically become gender aware or gender sensitive. On the contrary, most of them are reluctant to be in any way associated with women's issues, interests or perspectives for fear of losing votes in the next elections. Lovenduski [2005] is informative about whether the presence of women in politics provides a means of articulating women's perspectives and issues. It seems that in Slovakia, women's political participation has not yet reached the size necessary for the change of political culture, norms and attitudes. The presence of women in politics itself does not seem to be a guarantee of gender sensitive policies. Lack of political experience, knowledge, understanding and awareness of women's issues among the Slovak female politicians and absence of women's solidarity and support networks are reflected in gender-blind policies and attitudes.

This article aims to examine the problems of women's political representation in Slovakia. The discussion is based on statistical data supported by qualitative data from interviews conducted with female politicians, activists, and public officials (10 politicians, 12 activists, and 5 public officials). The research data were collected in 2003–2005, and although they present a picture of women's participation in both national and municipal politics, of particular interest in this article is representation at the local level, where women seem to be more successful and where their numbers are increasing slowly with every election. The study of women's political participation in municipal politics is more neglected in women's and political studies than analysis of the data at the national level, but it is equally important, because the local level can be the first step, and a good starting point, in a woman's political career.

Women's political representation as reflected in data

Women's political representation has been a topic of political, sociological, anthropological and feminist literature for several decades. Most feminist authors dealing with women's political participation have been examining the importance of women in politics, the meanings of equality, equal opportunities, justice, difference, citi-

zenship, and public-private dilemmas [e.g. Phillips 1998; Regulska 1998; Lovenduski 1998, 2005; Dahlerup 2002]. In her latest publication Lovenduski [2005] cites arguments in favour of increased women's representation and explores whether women's presence in politics makes a difference. She compares the theory of presence (how and why changes happen if there is equality of representation) and the theory of critical mass (only if the number of women reaches a certain critical mass, can qualitative changes occur in the institutional or political culture, values and norms may happen [Lovenduski 2005: 141–142]), both of which have their advocates and opponents. The arguments for women's political representation become even more complex if we realise that each female (or male) politician has a multidimensional presence in politics as a member of a political party, ethnic group, interest group, city, region, etc. [Lovenduski 2005: 14]. How are these arguments reflected in the young Slovak democracy?

Slovakia, a new member state in the European Union (as of 2004), had to adopt and implement all EU gender equality directives (as part of the *acquis communautaire*) within its national legislation as a condition for joining the European Union. Despite an improvement in legislation, all equality laws, national action plans and gender mainstreaming strategies calling for a balanced representation of women and men and a gender-sensitive approach to all government policies remain declaratory and formal, and their enforcement is slow and inefficient. Women are more active in local politics, community activities, interest groups and non-governmental organisations. Men still dominate the government, Parliament, political parties and trade unions. This trend has been similar in many countries in Central and Eastern Europe. We can agree with Gal and Kligman [2000: 93–95] that in the 1990s national politics in these countries remained a male realm, and it was civil society that became an arena for women's civil and political action. This tendency has been slowly changing in recent years, as a growing number of women in politics can be seen. Some of them come to politics from the third sector or from academia with experience of lobbying or working with politicians.

Women in the Slovak National Council (Parliament)

The data in Table 1 show that there is a big gap between the pre- and post-1989 period and demonstrate the formal character of women's participation in legislative power during the socialist period. Despite lower numbers after 1989, the ratio of women to men on the political parties' candidate lists has been increasing with every parliamentary election. The number of women elected as members of Parliament is low not only because of the low number of female candidates, but also because political parties rank women in lower places on the candidate lists, with small chance of being elected. However, in 2002 the share of female candidates in the top half of the lists increased to 20.9%, compared to 14.7% in 1998 [Filadelfiová, Bútorová and Gyárfášová 2002: 337]. Unlike the elections before, in 2002 most political parties included at least one woman in top five places, and eleven parties had a

Table 1. Women in Parliament

Year	Number of MPs	Number of women	% of women
1976–1981	150	41	27%
1981–1986	150	44	29%
1986–1990	150	44	29%
1990–1992	150	18	12%
1992–1994	150	23	15.3%
1994–1998	150	22	14.7%
1998–2002	150	21	14%
2002–2006	150	22/29	14.7/19.3%*

* After the election several male MPs became ministers in the cabinet and their seats in Parliament were taken by the candidates next on the lists, which improved the ratio of women in the National Council.

woman among top three candidates. Paradoxically, the Slovak National Party, the only political party at that time with a female leader, placed their second woman candidate at the ineligible 52nd position. Several political parties, mostly centre-left parties, announced informal quotas within the parties for the first time. Centre-right conservative parties, on the other hand, opposed any positive mechanisms to secure gender-balanced representation.

Political and public debate on introducing positive measures was for the first time initiated and opened by several women's organisations and female MPs before the elections 2002. Quotas are accepted in many countries across the world as temporary instruments aimed at improving the balanced participation of women and men in politics. They can be either legally imposed or voluntarily adopted by political parties. Since 2002 legal enforcement has several times been an item on the parliamentary and government agenda in Slovakia. The woman MP Eva Rusnáková's first proposal of a 30% minimum quota for women on the candidate lists was quickly rejected in Parliament. The Home Secretary Ivan Simko introduced a second proposal to amend the Election Act, which would secure every third position on the candidate lists for a person of the other gender. The bill proposed high fines for all political parties that break the law. This initiative attracted the wide attention of politicians, media and public. The deputy chair of the Christian Democratic Party and the present Minister of Justice (2005) Daniel Lipšic criticised the proposal as anti-constitutional and discriminatory because 'it strengthened the stereotype that some groups of population could not achieve success without a special protection' [Rebrova 2002; Jurinová 2004]. His argument was supported by a number of politicians, mostly from conservative right-wing parties. More than fifty women's organisations in Slovakia together with the Third Sector Association (*Gremium tretieho sektora* – an umbrella association of non-governmental organisations) were lobbying for

the 3:1 proposal, but in the end it was rejected by the cabinet and did not even make it into Parliament.

The topic resurfaced in 2003 when Jozef Heriban, the chair of the Committee for Equal Opportunities and Status of Women (the advisory body to the parliamentary Committee for Human Rights, Minorities and the Status of Women) presented a proposal for an amendment to the Election Act by setting up a support mechanism for women that would ensure every third place on the party list for a woman. The proposal was the result of a joint decision of the Committee and was supported by women's NGOs associated in Women's Forum 2000. Several newspapers opened a discussion on the topic. Most reactions were controversial and negative, as expressed in the daily *SME*:

The reason for the low representation of women in political life is their lower interest in this kind of self-realisation. It is so easy, human and natural. Sexes differ because their biological and social determination is different. That is why they prefer different roles. Quotas that want to change it are not only an attack against democracy, but also an abusive violence against women themselves. Social engineering is a modern version of communism. [Schutz, *SME*, 1 March 2004]

Several women activists publicly condemned this type of argumentation and criticised the negative attitude towards quotas: 'The quotas did not go through, there is no threat of communism or injustice to men. There is also no threat of a more human and better society' [Pietruchova 2004]. However, many women politicians, women MPs and even some women experts opposed the idea of quotas, arguing that society was not yet ready for this kind of support mechanism because of the vivid memories of negative historic experiences with forced and formal women's political representation during socialism. The lack of solidarity and collaboration, and the high level of rivalry between female politicians have also contributed to stopping debates on quotas. From the interviews with women politicians it was evident that they did not admit or recognise any obstacles to a woman's political career and did not see it as 'their' problem:

I stand for natural respect for a woman, and not for quotas. In my political career I have never experienced any barriers, had no negative experience that would limit me as a woman. I am not aware of any barriers that would prevent women from being successful either in politics or other public or economic positions. In my political party all women have equal opportunities to all positions. (MP, centre-left)

Obviously those of us who are in politics have not had any problems and have not experienced any barriers. (MEP, Socialist)

As a woman I feel equal in the Assembly. I do not feel like a protected animal species which needs special legal protection. (MP, centre-left, quoted from SITA (Slovak News Agency), 5 March 2004)

Although the political and public discourse on the legal enforcement of quotas remains open, it has had a positive impact on the awareness of the issue among the general public. This has been reflected in the growing support for quotas among citizens in opinion polls: 64% of women and 52% of men supported quotas in a survey in 2002, compared with 60% of women and 37% of men in 1995 [Gyárfášová and Pačková 2002: 24]. It seems that the voluntary adoption of quotas within political parties has a greater chance of being introduced in Slovakia, as was indicated in the 2002 elections. Centre-left parties were the first to come with informal quotas on the candidate lists and most parties took a decision to give at least one important party post to a woman. Although this cannot be considered a major improvement, it is a sign of change within political party policies.

Women in the European Parliament: victory or shame?

The level of participation of Slovak women politicians in the European Parliament is more satisfactory. Slovakia has five women among fourteen members of the European Parliament (35.71%). The total percentage of women in the EP is 30.33%, and only three women are chairs of parliamentary committees. One of them is the Slovak MEP Anna Záborská, chair of the Committee on Women's Right and Gender Equality, and Member of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats). Záborská's election was accompanied by protests from many MEPs, but also from numerous Slovak women's organisations. She has been criticised for her conservative opinions against women's rights, her opposition to abortion and gay rights, and her failure to support anti-discrimination legislation in Slovakia in 2004. Her appointment was a result of a political deal between the European People's Party and the Socialists, and it was met with deep disappointment among Slovak women activists.

The male face of government

Women's representation in the executive power is worse than in the legislative assembly. This may be owing to the fact that a ministerial post in the cabinet is the highest in terms of power and responsibilities, and men have more self-confidence and no inhibitions to compete for it. The number of female cabinet members has varied since 1989 from 0 to almost 15% and shows no steady increase. While in 1996 Slovakia was the only country out of 27 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union with a percentage of women ministers close to the OECD average (14.8% compared to 16.8% in the OECD; MONEE Project Women in Transition; UNICEF 1999), in 2005 it was at the bottom of the list with regard to the number of women ministers in national governments in the EU25 (0% compared to the EU average of 23%; EC-DG Employment Database, 2005). The data show that Slovak political representatives ignore the principle of balanced representation when it comes to the highest executive body.

Table 2. Women in the government

Year	Number of cabinet members	Number of women	% of women
1989–1990	23	1	4.30%
1990–1991	25	0	0
1991–1992	27	2	7.40%
1992–1994	29	3	10.20%
1994	18	1	5.60%
1994–1998	27	4	14.80%
1998–2002	20	2	10.00%
2002–2006	16	0	0

Women in regional and local politics

Municipal politics, often called ‘small politics’, is a reflection of politics at the national level, although some data from the local level show more positive trends. In 2002–2004 Slovakia implemented reform that decentralised public administration. The reform transformed older three-tier administration to a two-grade territorial self-administration with 1) regions – higher territorial units (*vyšší územný celok* – VÚC), and 2) towns and villages. The districts, the middle level of public administration, have been gradually dissolved and their competences shifted to higher territorial units and local municipalities.

At the regional level (and previously the district level) of public administration there are no gender-based data. The list of elected candidates shows the number of women in top positions to still be very low, with no women as regional government–VÚC presidents (even no candidatures) and only a small number of women as district government chairs. The percentage of female members of regional councils is 14% (EC-DG Employment Database 2005).

Local self-governments – municipalities – were established in 1990.² Since then, they have gone through major public administration transformation, with the final reform of decentralisation in 2002–2004. Municipalities have been given vast responsibilities, which put more pressure on the mayors, who have to cope with a wide range of problems despite a lack of human and financial resources and capacities.

The percentage of women mayors and lord mayors in municipalities (called *starostky* in small municipalities and *primátorky* in towns and cities) has been slow-

² There are 2924 municipalities in Slovakia, with an average size of 1800 inhabitants. Of them, 175 have the status of a town, city or city quarter (with its own municipality). Small municipalities with less than 1000 inhabitants represent over two-thirds of all municipalities [Bernátová et al. 2001; www.statistics.sk/vs2002/sk/tab/tab1.htm].

ly, but steadily, growing in each election (1990, 1994, 1998 and 2002), especially in small villages and small towns. No woman has been elected in any of the eight regional cities (centres of the regional VÚCs) since 1990; and only a few women have been mayors in district cities and towns. Opinion polls in Slovakia show that 45.2% of men and 33.6% of women consider the women's representation in local politics sufficient, while 25.6% of men and 42.1% of women find it insufficient [Gyárfášová and Pačková 2002].

Women mayors: a closer look at motivations for participating in local politics

The data in Table 3 demonstrate that women succeed mainly as mayors in small villages. According to surveys, these are often villages with decreasing and ageing populations. The regional divide, religion, ethnicity and traditionalism / modernity have no impact on the success rate of women. Women have been elected in all categories of Slovak villages – both ethnically and religiously homogeneous and heterogeneous. Size seems to be the main differentiating factor affecting the success of women in local elections [Filadelfiová, Radičová and Puliš 2000: 54–56].

From the interviews with female politicians at local and national levels, several reasons for the growing presence of women in local politics can be identified:

1. *Women as municipal officials are able to stay close to home and the family and can harmonise family duties with work, which is one of the most important factors in their decision to run for the position of mayor.*

The family is a significant factor in women's decision-making about entering politics. More than 90% of Slovaks get married at least once in their lives [Filadelfiová, Bútorová and Gyárfášová 2003: 720]. Family and marriage are still highly valued. Opinion polls show that 70.1% of men and 78.7% of women see family and children as the main barrier to entry into the world of politics [Gyárfášová and Pačková 2002]:

Table 3. Women mayors in local municipalities

Year	Number of mayors total	Number of women mayors in villages	Number of women mayors in cities	Number of women mayors total
total 1994–1998	2866	415 / 15.2%	3 / 2.2%	418/ 4.5%
1998–2002	2867	478 / 17.5%	6 / 4.4%	484/ 16.8%
2002–2006	2787	538 / 20.3%	3 / 2.2%	568/ 19.4%

Source: Súpis miest a obcí SR 1998. Bratislava: GEOTEXT 1998; ZMOS Bratislava 1999; Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic

24]. For most women who consider going to politics, spousal and family members' consent is very important. Without their permission and support a Slovak woman would rarely embark on a political career [Filadelfiová, Radičová and Puliš 2000: 95]. When it comes to the division of family duties, 68% of women and 55% of men believe that both partners should participate in child-raising and household care. In reality, 88% of Slovak women usually cook, 81% clean, 68% do the shopping, and 67% look after children [Gyárfášová and Pačková 2002]. The urban-rural divide, age and education are crucial factors for the division of labour in the family.

Family is what counts most when entering a political career... Here in Bratislava the situation is changing, we have different conditions and way of life, services...the family is not so involved... But the rest of Slovakia is more conservative, family help is more important. Everything is based on family relations...I often have meetings with mayors from small towns and villages. These women have to rely on their families if they want to do their work well. (MP and leader of one political party on the centre-right)

I can only thank God that my husband accepted my decision to become a mayor, he understands and supports me. It makes me stronger, this feeling that I do not have a problem in the family. It is a position that means many people come to your home at any time, on Saturday, Sunday, during holidays. The family is constantly disturbed. But as a mayor I am here for these people. A woman has a disadvantage that when she comes home, she is supposed to cook, wash, clean, all the things that men usually don't do. If a male mayor is in the office late hours, everything is ready when he comes home, his wife makes dinner, cleans, all is done... It is mainly Saturday when I can clean, wash, cook properly. It is good that the family tolerates it. I cannot afford any paid assistance on my salary. (Mayor)

I would have never entered politics if I were not from Bratislava. No one could persuade me to enter politics if I was from Košice and had to be three weeks away from home during the parliamentary sessions. It must be an enormous burden for every woman, a big problem. This is why so few women are in 'big' politics. Politics is for women who have adult children or no children. I have not met a woman in Slovak politics that has small children and is not from Bratislava... Women do not want to risk their family. (MP, liberal)

One of the reasons why I decided to become a mayor was that I could do it in the village that is my home. I have my family here, my husband and my son, my parents and sisters, and I can rely on their everyday support. (Mayor)

2. Women can identify better with local issues than with national politics. They feel more familiar with the problems of the community and the people, and more useful in finding direct solutions. The main motivation of women mayors is to help their village.

Most women mayors consider their work as a service to others, a community service. They are able to identify the problems of their villages and their citizens, and they

want to help the community. They see their work as an opportunity to be involved and as a challenge to find solutions to everyday problems of the people. They want to see their villages growing to prosperity. They do not often see their position as a career step towards higher positions, but as a commitment, service and mission.

I wanted to help the village. I had some experience in working with people; I have been doing it all my life. And social awareness. The situation in small villages is bad, the economy is poor, people need help and support. (Mayor)

I am here to help the people and make our village nicer. I did not have much experience when I became a mayor, but people from the village trusted me. At least some of them. I have been living here from my birth, I know everyone. I am doing it for them. (Mayor)

3. *The position of mayor in small municipalities is less attractive in terms of power and money.*

Mayors in Slovakia are paid according to the size of the village (number of inhabitants), which means that in small localities salaries are low. The mayors of these villages have very limited financial and human resources, but a large amount of responsibilities. They can often employ only one additional administrative person and/or an accountant, and they have to manage a wide range of work themselves. All interviewees agreed that the position of a mayor in small places is less attractive and financially interesting than it is in bigger villages or towns. According to the mayors, that is the reason why men prefer bigger municipalities, where they have the support of a large staff, bigger budgets, bigger projects and higher salaries. Conversely, women who run for mayor in small municipalities are motivated by their desire to make a change and to help their community, rather than by power or money.

The salaries of mayors in villages and towns are fixed and set on the basis of the number of inhabitants. Maybe that is the reason why men are mayors in towns and cities. Their salaries are much bigger there. Council members can suggest some financial award for a mayor – monthly or annual, but it is not very common in our village. I don't know why, whether it's envy or what. And this is despite the fact that I manage to raise an extra 4 million SK a year from various foundations. I think that if one finds extra money for the village, one deserves to get some award, it is de-motivating otherwise. So the only thing that motivates me is the feeling that I do the job well. (Mayor)

Here in our village there is a tradition of women mayors. Before 1989 we had a woman mayor, too. In a nearby spa town, Sliac, it's different. You can't compare the conditions here and there. You know, in bigger places, it's all about money. There were women candidates in Sliac, but they had no success. They only vote for men there. They have bigger opportunities for investment activities, more building activities... And more money. (Mayor)

4. Affiliation to a political party does not play a crucial role in municipal politics.

Many women consider politics a male domain and a dirty business. The political agenda is not a decisive factor in municipal elections and that is one of the reasons why more women are attracted to run for the position of mayor. According to a number of surveys, independent candidates are trusted more, and in local elections they receive more votes than candidates who represent a political party [Bernátová et al. 2001: 247].

In our country, politics is understood as a battle for power, 'chairs', money and influence. It is not understood as a way of governing society. Politics and political parties are tools for governing society. Only if people understand civil society – that it's all about how the state is governed, then women will also do more. They understand it better at a local, communal level. (MP and leader of a political party on the centre-right)

I am mayor now for the second electoral term. I always ran as an independent candidate. Maybe there are some villages where political affiliation matters, but not here... In this village we do not organise big campaigns before an election. We had just one meeting, where each candidate presented her or his programme (there were three more male candidates in the first election, then in the second electoral term I was the only one). So I don't know. Maybe people just wanted a new face. Maybe because I used to be publicly very active... They could see I was interested and wanted to help. Maybe. (Mayor)

I have been a member of the municipal council since 1986, so I know this work. This is my second electoral term as mayor. In the first election I was a candidate for the Slovak Democratic Left, for the second time I ran as a candidate for the Slovak Communist Party. But our village doesn't have strong political parties. Once I was elected, I didn't mix politics with my job. I think we are here to serve citizens regardless of any political affiliation. (Mayor)

The research confirmed the results of previous studies [Filadelfiová, Radičová and Puliš 2000] that women mayors can be distinguished into three categories based on their motivation:

- Mayors who have long experience working with people from the socialist period (former functionaries in the Communist Party, members of the municipal councils, women who were active in various organisations such as the Slovak Association of Women, the Socialist Youth Union, etc.). These women often appear in regional, district or local networks and positions. Their experience from previous public work (management and public speaking skills) and higher self-confidence put them in the front lines of various organisations, including the offices of public administration. These women have no problem occupying top positions, and they see it as the natural continuation of their previous activities.
- Mayors who ran for the position because 'there was no one else to do it'. This is quite common in small, marginalised villages with an ageing population and of-

ten with a high proportion of women in the population (mainly widows).³ Small villages under 500 inhabitants represent 43% of all villages in Slovakia and have the highest proportion of post-productive population [Faltán and Pašiak 2004], which has a negative impact on civic participation in these communities. Women who agree to become candidates make their decisions on the basis of pleas and pressure from fellow citizens.

- Mayors from the younger generation, or more career-oriented women, who are motivated more by pull factors rather than push factors: by the opportunity to make a difference by improving living conditions in the village; by the challenge of helping and serving the people; by career development prospects and self-satisfaction; and in some cases purely by the opportunity to get a job in a village with otherwise limited job opportunities.

Women mayors prove themselves to be successful and reliable in their activities, a fact expressed by the chair of the Association of Towns and Villages in Slovakia, Michal Sýkora:

There should be more women in municipal politics. Women are more responsible. It has never happened that they ignore the problems in their villages. If the mayor is a man, he takes it for granted that he doesn't need to take on any family duties. Women manage to do both...Municipal politics is the place where they should start... (SME, 28 November 2002)

In order to encourage more women to participate in municipal politics, several NGOs organise campaigns, projects and workshops aimed at women mainly in rural areas. VOKA, the Rural Agency for Community Activities, is the most active organisation in this area. VOKA is a community association that aims to support the development of rural areas by motivating local resources, protecting local heritage and training rural leaders. VOKA runs the Programme for Rural Women Leaders. It organises informal meetings, training sessions and seminars for women who have capacity to become leaders in their communities, along with meetings for women mayors designed to facilitate the exchange of examples of best practices. In conjunction with the Rural Parliament in Slovakia (VIPA), VOKA organises an annual competition of female leaders as part of the World Day of Rural Women (15 October), which was declared at the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995. In Slovakia, 'The Week of Rural Women' takes place in October every year. Conferences, workshops, exhibitions and informal meetings of rural women leaders are organised throughout the whole countryside. The objective of the competition 'Female Leader of the Year' is to

³ The Slovak population is ageing, and women's life expectancy is increasing (78 for women, 70 for men as measured in 2005). The early death of men results in an unbalanced distribution of gender and family status within the elderly population. The most rapidly growing population group is people over 60, an increasing share of whom are women, mostly widows.

motivate, encourage and publicly recognise female leaders in the countryside. Several categories are open for nominations: 1) woman-activist (a woman active in a non-profit organisation or association); 2) woman-politician (a woman in local politics – a mayor, a member of a municipal council, or a member of the Rural Parliament); and 3) woman-organiser (not a member of any organisation, but active in the village as an individual organiser of various activities).

The political representation of women at the local level in Slovakia is still not high, but it exhibits a positive trend towards increasing and shows potential for the future. According to some literature [e.g. Meier 2003], working in local politics is often considered a good starting point for the further political career of a woman in higher politics. However, it does not seem to be the pattern followed by women mayors in small and marginalised villages in Slovakia. None of the interviewees is planning to go into higher politics.

Conclusion

The analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data on women's political representation in Slovakia reveals that women are under-represented in all areas of political life. The participation of women in legislative and executive bodies shows no regular patterns of increase, although the parliamentary and public debate on positive measures such as quotas has had an impact on internal policies in several political parties, mainly the centre-left oriented, and on public awareness. Women's participation in municipal politics has been slowly but steadily increasing with every election. Women tend to be more successful in small municipalities with decreasing and ageing populations. Men predominate as mayors in bigger towns and cities that have more financial and human resources and are more attractive in terms of power and money.

When looking at the development of gender equality discourse in Slovakia over the past decade it is possible to see two controversial phenomena. Although public awareness and the sensitivity of gender issues has been improving slightly, as all the opinion polls show, the approach taken of executive and legislative institutions remains unchanged and formal, and there is continued unwillingness to enforce the implementation of international commitments. It proves the argument that political institutions, processes and procedures have a capacity to preserve traditions and cultures and to prevent or slow changes [Lovenduski 2005: 26]. This tendency has become stronger in the most recent government (2002-2006), which backs conservative values and ignores gender equality policies more than any other previous government.

The reasons for the poor visibility of women at all political levels are complex, but a considerable portion of responsibility for the present status quo must be born by women themselves. Those women who succeed in high politics do not use their political power to assert the gender agenda. There are only a few women in the Slovak political arena that have raised their voices in support of women's rights pub-

licly. Several women MPs in the most recent parliaments tabled the question of quotas, but this did not lead to any changes in legislation. In a number of informal interviews, both male and female respondents agreed that female politicians do not want to take the risk of starting a debate on women's issues mainly for fear of losing the support of their voters (especially voters in rural areas and small towns, which make up the majority). In addition, most female politicians show a lack of interest in and knowledge, understanding and awareness about women's rights and the principle of equal opportunities.

Strategies for increasing women's participation in decision-making

The first strategy is quotas, which should be understood as one of the temporary tools with which it is possible to rectify the imbalance in political representation. The legal enforcement of quotas in Slovakia was rejected in Parliament several times. A few parties introduced informal quotas before the 2002 election. In spite of the limited commitment of parties to adopt quotas, this would appear to be the most suitable path for Slovakia and it can be enforced in the future. The public support for introducing quotas has been slowly increasing in recent years, as shown in the opinion polls, which proves that the attitude of society towards positive action measures is changing. Raising awareness also continues to be a very important long-term strategy. Despite the progress of the past decade, gender mainstreaming at all levels is still formal, and it is not functioning in reality. Even men and women who are aware of gender policies do not consider it a serious issue and minimise its significance. More public discussions, events and regular media coverage are needed. Another strategy is education, which is a key factor in fighting gender stereotypes and gender blindness. This must start with the education of teachers, and the education of students at primary and secondary schools. It is also important to review and change the textbooks that students use, as they continue to reflect many traditional gender models. Finally, a system of auditing and monitoring mechanisms at all levels needs to be established by independent agencies. It is not enough to have legislation if it is not implemented in practice and monitored regularly. The gender mainstreaming approach must become a policy at all levels and in all organisations and as a normal part of everyday life in society.

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